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10-4 on your 10-20, or was that a 10-11?

Words can beat codes for first responder communications.

"Interoperability" is tough to say without stuttering. Since 9/11, stuttering has also accompanied efforts to achieve interoperability in the field, where first responders need to communicate effectively across departments, jurisdictions and even states when emergencies or catastrophic events occur.

A common-sense strategy announced this week by Gov. Tim Kaine offers one small but refreshing step forward.

The plan calls for the state's public safety employees to develop a common language in "plain English" for communications instead of relying on number codes -- such as 10-10 for "fight in progress" -- to describe emergency situations. Instead of 10-10, an officer could simply transmit, "Fight in progress."

Why would this plan help emergency responders communicate? Because local, regional and state public safety agencies often use different codes. For example, a 10-34 might alert authorities in one jurisdiction to a riot and in another jurisdiction signal, say, a coffee break.

Several first responder associations in Virginia have endorsed the plan and their support is a significant selling point. Jim Gordon, a spokesman for the American Federation of Police and Concerned Citizens, said Tuesday that relying on language instead of codes should enhance communication.

"There's nothing you can say in two or three words that won't be understood by other officers," he said. "It doesn't take but two words to say 'officer down.'"

The codes are a throwback to the 1950s, he said. And communications equipment today provides clarity of speech unheard of a few decades ago.

Unfortunately, clarity cannot transcend incompatible frequencies, training discrepancies and other barriers -- including the federal government's failure to make interoperability a national security priority. Adoption of a common language could help.

Turf spats, inadequate federal funding, frequency allocation struggles and other squabbles have slowed progress nationally toward interoperability. Virginia has done better. And the approach described by Kaine promises results instead of stalemate.

The state's first responders should get on board.